

Anne Truitt Threshold





Anne Truitt at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, December 1973

Anne Truitt Threshold

Works from the 1970s

Essay by Anne M. Wagner

Writings by Anne Truitt

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, NEW YORK



Morning Child in the artist's studio, Washington, DC, 1973

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*January is my favorite month, when the light is plainest, least colored.*¹ —Anne Truitt

Anne Truitt was not just a visual artist. She was also an accomplished writer who, in the 1940s, briefly considered a career in fiction. In the end, though, it is autobiography that best conveys her writerly voice. If one’s past is a foreign country, Truitt ventured there often, spoke its language like a native, and did not shrink from serving as its principal historian and guide. To read her three published journals — *Daybook* (1982), *Turn* (1986), and *Prospect* (1996) — is to discover, and perhaps to envy, their astonishing recall of a life whose biological beginning was already well in the past — five decades and counting — when work began. Truitt was fifty-three when she started to write *Daybook*, in June 1974; *Prospect* appeared eight years before her death, in December 2004. These dates alone are enough to reveal an essential aspect of the journal: it was the project, even the companion, of a woman who, after the breakup of her marriage in 1969, was often alone. And, as her journals show, Truitt’s aloneness coincided with a growing sense of psychic strength and social independence. Although she firmly resisted being labeled a “woman artist,” she nonetheless gave considerable thought to the sort of artist she was instead, and the kind of woman too.²

Perhaps not all efforts at self-narration deserve careful analysis, but in Truitt’s case there can be little doubt. Yet providing such scrutiny is not an easy task. The voice of the journals is not only vividly, even seductively introspective but also meticulously intelligent; it brings us face-to-face with a narrator we are eager to rely on. In fact, it soon emerges that reliance is one of the journals’ main themes. The “Anne Truitt” who speaks in these pages tells a story not only of being trusted — this was her role in her family, as both child and adult — but also of learning to trust herself. Still more than this, Truitt the writer seems to need to be “reliable”; her books are shaped by the effort to say what she means.

Daybook begins by explicitly declaring itself the therapeutic outcome of overwhelming emotion, an inundation of feeling that rose “like a tidal wave.”³ Its cause lay in the staging of back-to-back retrospectives, the first in December 1973 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the second in April 1974 at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC. This was no ordinary stocktaking, and by July its one-two pacing had taken its toll: “I felt crazed,” Truitt wrote, “as china is crazed, with tiny fissuring.”⁴ The result was a “kind of panic,” a feeling of being “brutalized” by emotions she had thought long since resolved. Hence the journal, the incremental outcome of a resolution to record her life for a year. And, as the seasons passed,



fig. 1: Third Haven Friends Meeting House, Easton, Maryland, 1975

change slowly ensued: “I began to see how my life had made itself as I was living it, how naturally and inevitably I had become an artist.”⁵

It is hard not to feel the somatic effects of this deceptively simple statement. Above all, they lie in its pace and rhythm. Short phrases follow one upon the other, *how* and *as* and *how*, and with each one we are asked to go just a bit slower, to collect our breath. It is as if the sentence is gathering itself together to reach an eventual fruition: “I had become an artist.” With this declaration, a crucial sentence reaches a marvelous conclusion. A fissured vessel has become an integrated being, the artist’s self. The process feels natural, inevitable, and it leaves Truitt content with self and work.

The narrative drive of the three books — their preoccupation with becoming — is such that simply to see them as journals, full stop, is to risk missing how closely their qualities as writing are bound up with an active effort to reconcile present and past, to smooth the pathway between two indeterminate places in time. This may be why, for *Turn* and *Prospect*, the artist was willing to abandon the subtitle her publisher had given to *Daybook*, “Journal of an Artist,” in favor of a subtly different qualifying phrase, “*Journey of an Artist*” (the emphasis is mine), its slight but significant modification pointing to the task all three journals take on.⁶ To present the path of becoming in terms of travel makes the artist a wayfarer or pilgrim, yet Truitt’s narrative breaks with the bildungsroman tradition in one crucial way. Becoming an artist does not mean leaving home and family behind. Instead both are visited and revisited in her pages; integrating them into her adult identity is crucial to the process Truitt presents as self-acceptance or, more poignantly, as the path of developing sufficient “kindness,” as one must, “to forgive oneself for one’s life.”⁷

As all this suggests, Truitt’s books, if not quite a talking cure, certainly present themselves as intentionally restorative: by these lights, introspection and memory have tonic effects.⁸ Even so, Truitt’s reflections on her work play a quite distinct part in her writing; art and life are asked to fit the same template, to move between the natural and the abstract, articulating a tension that eases and tightens but in any case always defines her understanding of her identity as an artist. For Truitt, living life well means not only maintaining a balance “somewhere between these two orders of the natural and the abstract” but also sustaining “the delicate tension between intuition and sensory information.”⁹ And this is not all. There are also important conflicts between the world of the artist and the life of the mother, and these require careful working out. Modernity has too often seen professional accomplishment as the enemy of maternal, not to say familial, responsibility, and vice versa; Truitt worked hard to see them reconciled. No doubt it helped that her Bryn Mawr education left her well versed in dialectical argument. Heraclitus was a favorite philosopher, and the interaction of opposing forces played a motivating role in her conception of her art: “My sculptures hold this line: the severe logos of structure magnetizing the flux of color.”¹⁰

Nature and abstraction, intuition and the senses, structure and color, severity and flux: these polarities are insistent, yet the more draconian their terms’ separation, the more questions such polarities raise. If we aim to grasp what Truitt means by saying her sculptures “hold [a] line,” we are soon tripped up. Her vivid figure — the holding of a line evokes an entrenched battle between two strong opponents

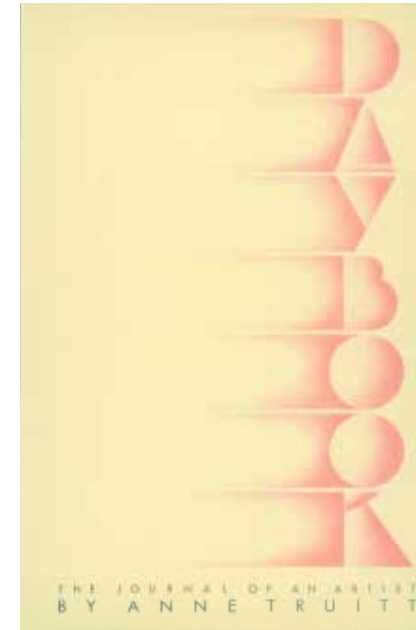


fig. 2: First edition of Anne Truitt’s *Daybook*, published by Pantheon in 1982

— raises an unexpected barrier to further thought. If, as the artist’s axiom implies, her sculptures reconcile the mutability of color and the strict rules of structure, we are left asking how and why such a reconciliation needed to be brokered, and on such last-ditch terms. Why was this the task her work took on? Although Truitt was not alone in attempting to join color and sculpture — David Smith, Anthony Caro, and Donald Judd are the most salient contemporary examples — she was certainly among those few artists who have really homed in on what was at stake in their sometimes uneasy union.¹¹ For color offers a means to go against what sculpture seems to be. Color is the realm of transitory experience: it is declaratively optical, and its power is such that (as was said in the 1960s) it could “destroy the cube,” that ubiquitous paradigm of contemporary sculptural form.¹² Not all critics, though, would put the matter in terms of negation or destruction. For Jane Harrison Cone, who wrote a brief introduction to an exhibition of Truitt’s sculpture in 1971, aliveness was at stake: “Truitt sculpts through the colors that she uses, that is, the blunt, almost improbable boxiness of the pieces is rendered unremarkable, natural, by her control of color. It is as though, through her use of color, she sculpts each neutral shape — in the sense of quickening inert material — into life.”¹³

Why did Truitt engage in such a life-and-death struggle? And what did her difficult synthesis of sculpture and color imply? The answers this essay provides are only suggestions; they stem from the effort to discover what lies within or behind the polish of the artist’s terse and brilliant image of “the severe logos of structure magnetizing the flux of color.” How can structure magnetize — hold sway over — the fluctuations of color? It is not easy to say. One can only hope that, as a writer herself, she would not object to a set of verbal proposals in answer to the question

her statement raises.⁴ But perhaps she would simply point to her work, suggesting I look quietly and reminding me, as she did an interviewer in 1976, “What other people do with my work, I don’t much care; that’s not my business.”¹⁵ She was well aware that her art, as she put it, “is just about impossible to get into words.”¹⁶

* * *

Does it matter that the eyesight Truitt was born with was not very good? She was conscious of this deficit, as is anyone who gets glasses at the age of ten and is amazed to discover that the leaves on the trees are suddenly visible from many yards away. Nuance and detail abruptly enter the picture, and by the time this happened to Truitt, she had already begun exploring, and thus experiencing, the outside world. Her knowledge centered on Easton, the little town on Maryland's Eastern Shore that was her birthplace as well as the haven to which in memory she most often returned [fig. 1]. James Meyer is one of several writers who have already pointed to the resonance of those recollections for her early sculpture: her grasp of the town's white clapboard buildings served her as the basis for the architectural models or fragments — both drawn and sculpted — she extracted from the built fabric of the place.¹⁷

Meyer's visual evidence comes chiefly from a pair of working drawings — both depicting Dutchman's Lane, a street in Easton — that, like many of Truitt's explorations of sculptural forms and arrangements, were made in fall 1962. Yet the two drawings [figs. 3 and 4], which he addresses in a 2009 catalogue essay, are decidedly anomalous given the graphic matter-of-factness and three-dimensionality of the set of studies as a whole. Shapes, profiles, the occasional volume: the other drawings, even those that do not employ one-point perspective, manage, however summarily, to suggest the idea of an object in space [fig. 5]. When Truitt first drew Dutchman's Lane, by contrast, she simply reconstructed its layout (though, oddly, never including its edges), juxtaposing small squares and rectangles, then adding the names of one or two owners and an occasional random detail of house or yard: "German siding," for example, or "lilies of the Valley," or "identical squares."

Such fragmentary observations cannot have exhausted Truitt's memories of the street in question; they simply summon it, identifying rather than inventorying its features as a place. The second Dutchman's Lane drawing [fig. 4] displays a "placeness" that is simpler still. It hinges on nothing more than a deliberately artless arrangement of eight rectangles in two straggling lines. There is no scale, no detail, and (again) no street in sight. Without the inscription in the upper right corner, would there be a way to infer that this drawing also makes a map of Dutchman's Lane? Would we grasp that its abstract anti-grid represents two facing lines of buildings seen from above? Truitt later wrote that she thought of Easton's houses as forts, and the blankness of the paper reinforces a sense of their isolation in a nowhere that is hardly a place at all. If Easton somehow served Truitt as a model, it could assume this exemplary position only by reduction and stringent omission. Her drawings "of" Easton are after the essence of presence — presence sealed off, reduced, and epitomized; presence before (or after) vision, with glasses or without.

This radical selectivity is all the more striking in light of the thrilling

fig. 3: *Dutchman's Lane*, 1962. Graphite on paper. 8 x 5 inches; 20 x 13 cm

fig. 4: *Dutchman's Lane*, 1962. Graphite on paper. 8 x 5 inches; 20 x 13 cm

fig. 5: Working drawing for *Asheville III*, 1962. Graphite on paper. 9½ x 8½ inches; 24 x 22 cm

inclusiveness of Truitt’s published memories of the Eastern Shore. They are among the most vivid passages she ever wrote. There is the stained stump on which the grocer beheaded his stock of chickens; the rags in the galvanized garbage cans behind the undertaker’s parlor, rags “soaked with blood and yellow pus”; and the feeling of moving, aged seven, “through deceptively soft-looking wild grasses that prickled my legs.”¹⁸ Details like these are so sensually saturated that it takes an act of will — or careful rereading — to discern their place in a narrative of coming-of-age. The backyard gore is encountered en route to the choicest violets, and picking them leads to Truitt’s first lie. The real deception hiding in the grasses turns out to be a decidedly masculine snake: “I felt a blunt muscular hit on my leg, a sharp pain.”¹⁹ Danger lurks in the Easton paradise, as befits a tale of growing up. The rags and blood and blunt snakebite look forward as well as back.

But perhaps this reading takes us too far from the question of vision and the leaves on the trees. *Daybook* includes a passage that insists we return there forthwith. Written on October 24, 1974, it begins with Truitt waking up that morning and, after little preparation, develops into the most extended passage on the implications of her eyesight she would ever write:

The world had always been an actively moving, enticing blur to me before, a sort of challenge I had to make sense of by guesswork because it presented itself as a mystery. I had always felt at a distance from it, and in truth that’s the way my senses presented it to me: I saw at twenty feet what other people saw at three hundred. A whole world had been formed on the basis of faulty information. [...] I could only operate confidently within a short radius.²⁰

As Truitt sees it, several psychological consequences followed from the fact that the limits on her vision went unnoticed and uncorrected for so long: her reserve and withdrawal, for example, her interior focus, her tendency to live inside her mind. All this, as well as the recognition that in her myopia, and its consequences, she resembled her mother: “The world couldn’t have been real to either of us the way it is to people who can see clearly.”²¹

Daybook takes sight seriously; it speaks of inner vision, of the seeing that occurs through our capacities for mental visualization, as well as of sight as a physical reality, a physiological effect. Sight, we might say, shaped the artist’s sense of self. Or, put rather differently, Truitt’s voice in the book demonstrates a sustained concern with the nature of sight, both her own and that of other people. Inevitably, perhaps, she uses sight as a central metaphor, but she also understands that the lived experience of vision is shaped decisively by both psychological and physical factors.

And she is interested enough in these topics that in an entry written the morning after the opening of her solo exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art in January 1975 [fig. 6], her report on the evening focuses almost exclusively on a dinner-table conversation with a physicist. She gives a word or two about an overheard comment but repeats no art-world gossip, ventures no self-doubt, and indulges in no self-congratulation. She simply writes down the gift of her conversation with the physicist, which centers on his account of the implications of variations in the eye’s structure — in particular, the saturation of yellow in the macula lutea, the central

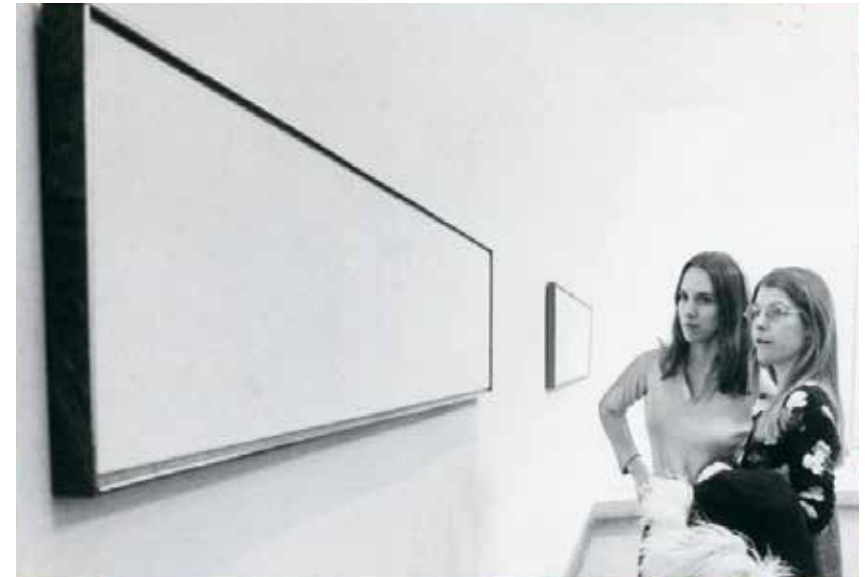


fig. 6: Exhibition view of “Anne Truitt: White Paintings,” Baltimore Museum of Art, 1975

area of the retina (she calls it a filter) — for individual perception of color. The more yellow there is in this filter, the less blue light enters the eye. From this scrap of information, she deduces why she takes off her glasses to mix color: because without them, unable to focus, she is less reliant on the macula lutea and the limitations it places on her color perception. To see peripherally is to be able to concentrate on “the entire possible range of subtle hue and value discrimination.” And it means doing so, we might add, without having to locate color or to see it as fixed to an object or site. Color, for Truitt, is not local, or even locatable, in any stable way. On the contrary, it was something the artist could “see in [her] head very clearly” but was not always able to (re)create. “So what I do is come as close as I can.”²²

When Truitt spoke of coming close to color, she was invoking her working methods as much as anything else. For if, on the one hand, she operated with a mental image — the color of a sculpture, or perhaps a colored sculpture — on the other hand she also felt the necessity of developing a concrete means of approximating the appearance of such an imaginary thing. It was not the object’s shape but its color that posed the problem. Her shapes were absolute, rather than arrived at, but their colors were not. She did not find them using sketches (“I hate the word sketch”), but rather, as she described in a 1976 interview, by creating “rough facsimiles” within which she arranged “splotches” of color, “simply for the purpose of experimenting with the counterpointed proportion of color areas.”²³ And then, when each experiment was completed, she put the result in a drawer.

Many still survive. They show color being put through its paces, with the “counterpointed proportion of color areas” Truitt spoke of often given an orientation — and



fig. 7: Working drawing for *Primrose*, 1972. Acrylic on paper. 8½ x 5¼ inches; 22 x 13 cm
 fig. 8: Working drawing for *Grant*, 1974. Acrylic on paper. 5½ x 6 inches; 14 x 15 cm
 fig. 9: Working drawing for *Milkweed Run*, 1974. Acrylic on paper. 5¾ x 5¼ inches; 15 x 13 cm

sometimes inscriptions — that transform an initially flat mosaic of brushed-on patches of pigment into a proto-sculptural stack. This is the effect of the most vibrant one of these experiments, which was undertaken in connection with *Primrose* [fig. 7]. Other drawings in this category — for example, those done in relation to *Grant* and *Milkweed Run* (both 1974) — fit a slightly different pattern, measuring their colors more sparingly, in schemes that more directly anticipate the floor-bound sculptures whose colors are being worked out [figs. 8 and 9].

To understand these drawings as “facsimiles,” as Truitt calls them, means recognizing that they clearly do not replicate the sculptural objects whose titles they share. Instead they aim to record — or re-create — the origins of those objects in or as ideas. For Truitt, idea always precedes physical form. “Coming close to color,” for her, means arriving at usable versions of the coloristic effects and conjunctions she can see in her mind. The result will only ever be approximate — this Truitt accepts — but even so, it should come close enough to summon an imaginary somewhere (“Easton,” perhaps) whose fascinations are distant yet undimmed. This somewhere is always a magically amorphous place untethered from mundane reality; there is no reality to which it corresponds. No wonder the very idea of the sketch is anathema: for Truitt, vision remains a mystery, a prelapsarian dream to be cherished not least because, as an experience, it is so profoundly unreal. Remember her insistent characterization of what her distinctive — and matrilineal — vision meant: “The world couldn’t have been real to either of us in the same way it is to people who can see clearly.”

How striking it is that an artist now known mostly for her assertively “box-like” sculptures — prefabricated shapes that from the outset, according to Clement Greenberg, constituted the conspicuous originality of her work²⁴ — thought so much about the deceptive nature of sight; and how significant it seems that she enlisted such an embodied and technical understanding of the operations of the eye as support for her practice. On the one hand, there is vision as a perceptual mechanism shaping the outer world; on the other, there is vision as shaping the inner world — the unworldliness — of mother and me. And somewhere between the two, there is Truitt’s work and its preoccupation with perceptual experiences that hover along an invisible edge — a threshold, she often calls it — “the point at which the abstract nature of events becomes perceptible.”²⁵ In the 1970s this idea, this site, was an ongoing preoccupation, which she repeatedly attempted to define. It was “the limen of consciousness,” for example, where *consciousness* stands for the fascinating vividness of sight.²⁶ And, Truitt being Truitt, she is able to excavate its origins in a dramatic infantile memory, a visual primal scene. The setting is the nursery at night. Her nurse is changing her diaper when “suddenly, from my right, a white shadow [...] lances across my vision, a deliberate lightning” that moves across the darkness of the room. With its passage, the surprised baby sees that its “small, pulpy body” is surrounded by space.²⁷

To encounter Truitt working her way back to such a deeply buried memory of perception’s origins is to be given evidence of what became an extended train of thought. Its traces can be found in *Daybook* in entries spanning more than a month. It is as if she turned from her first rational formulation of the concept (“the point where the abstract nature of events becomes perceptible”) so as to

fig. 10: *Arundel XXVII*, 1975,
Acrylic and graphite on canvas.
20 3/4 x 21 1/4 inches; 53 x 54 cm
Arundel XVII, 1975, Acrylic
and graphite on canvas.
23 1/4 x 32 1/4 inches; 59 x 82 cm



access a less logical layer of the self. A “white shadow” is stored there, a “deliberate lightning” — both unforgettable examples of the vividly oxymoronic imagery the artist-writer so loved.

This is Truitt at her elusive best — or should one write *worst*? Certainly, for some viewers, the abstraction of Truitt’s work and thinking presents difficulties. It keeps them from crossing over the threshold that concerned her, the place where shadows are white, lightning is purposeful, and perceptions are formed. While Truitt was using her journal to think through her ideas about perception, she launched herself into a new sort of drawing — or anti-drawing, perhaps — that takes up the same themes. By January 1975, she had elaborated these ideas as paintings, the most perceptually challenging works she would create. They make up the *Arundel* series, which constituted the entirety of the Baltimore exhibition at whose opening she discussed the macula lutea with a friendly physicist. The compositional origins of the series go back six months to a series of drawings, *Stone South*, begun during her first residency at Yaddo, the artists’ retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York. (That residency also resulted in some of *Daybook*’s most vivid passages.)

The *Stone South* drawings, in Truitt’s straightforward description, are “very spare,” yet their aim, she writes, is “to catch the threshold of consciousness.”²⁸ Again, the turn of phrase conjures a wildly elusive concept; how much easier it is to think of catching a train, or even a falling star, than of laying hold of the point where consciousness begins — or, as Truitt put it, “the point at which the abstract nature of events becomes perceptible.” How could such a quixotic understanding be brought into view? Truitt offers a possible answer: “This comes down to the placement of interval: lines meeting and not meeting as close as the force of their lengths will allow; a metaphor for the virtually imperceptible ways in which our lives turn, critical turns of change determined by interval.”²⁹

From lines to lives: this passage is breathtakingly full of the artist’s sense of the representational powers of radical abstraction. The *Stone South* drawings, like the works that followed them, require the full concentration of one’s powers of sight on precious little. (They utterly defeat photography, which is why none have been illustrated here.) The same is true of the *Arundels*, which make use of three main components [fig. 10]. First there is the white canvas ground, whose stark emptiness provides the inevitable background — or battlefield — on which to challenge perception. Truitt herself calls this ground a “field of action,” whose implacable whiteness renders it “at once active and inert.” Second are the faint yet precise pencil lines placed at calculated intervals, which are as likely to seem too far apart as too close. Finally come short dabs of white acrylic, which have been edged up flush against the line but do not quite cover it; Kristen Hileman has observed that in her 1970s sculpture, Truitt “literalized line,” and that apt phrase applies equally here.³⁰ Within the general emptiness of the *Arundels*, even the smallest touch of paint seems surprisingly direct and tactile, as well as bewilderingly precise. Indeed, it is easy to imagine the artist working with a small stiff brush, its bristles blunt-cut — the perfect vehicle for such a carefully varied and measured application of paint. In fact, *measurement* might well be the watchword of these pictures, as if Truitt has set herself the problem of representing the infinite complexity that lies within the verb *to see*. It seems impossible to grasp just how the spare exactitude of her technique yields such magical effects.

Fellow myopics may find themselves hypothesizing that Truitt once again found it useful to put her glasses aside and work up close.

Making is one thing and seeing another. It is clear that what mattered to Truitt most about the *Arundel* paintings was how the viewer would take them in. As she explains, they are works that aim to put vision under stress. This is why, in her words, “the lines in them are sometimes so widely spaced that they cannot be seen simultaneously, and the fields of white in which these lines act depend for their understanding on peripheral vision; that is, on the entire range of sight from all the way left to all the way right.”³¹ Which is to say, as the friendly physicist would have put it and as she herself records in *Daybook*, both foveal and nonfoveal vision must be used to see the *Arundels*. If the series “depends” on peripheral vision, this is because it catalyzes — puts into physical operation — a particular mode of seeing. The *Arundels* ask the eyes to move back and forth in their sockets, scanning the flatness of the picture’s field. It is as if the paintings are giving one’s vision a test or a workout, in the process widening the physiological operations required not only to take in the painting’s surface but also to see it *as* a surface. Note, moreover, that the *Arundels* need not be large to evoke such a sensation: on the contrary, the elusive delicacy of their execution somehow creates the impression of a spatial expanse.³² This expanse is more abstract than particular: although the title of the series mobilizes a Maryland place-name, the *Arundel* paintings only marginally evoke the physical qualities or character of a specifiable site.

We don’t need to return to the snide and angry attacks that greeted the Baltimore exhibition — the predictable jabs at “White Paintings Fit for That Emperor,” the verdict that the show was “A Towering Disappointment” — to grasp just how risky, how experimental, these paintings were.³³ Truitt’s intention was to go behind or beyond phenomena, to convey a force or principle that lies past sight. Here is how she put it in a journal entry written on November 14, 1974:

In these paintings I set forth, to see for myself how they appear, what might be called the tips of my conceptual icebergs in that I put down so little of all that they refer to. I try in them to show forth the forces I feel to be the reality behind, and more interesting than, phenomena. I keep trying to catch the laws I can feel illustrated in phenomena: in meetings and just-not-meetings; in forces abutting, thrusting one against another, illuminating one another. A force is only visible in its effect, and it is the split second in which this effect becomes just barely visible that haunts me.³⁴

Truitt’s “split second” — the essentially invisible moment in which change takes effect — brings us back to the concept of the threshold that haunts all her work. Less a place than a moment, it is not so much *where* a change takes effect, but *when*. A moment in time, a moment in vision, where time and vision are one. A disembodied moment of transcendence, in other words, where past fixities and future contingencies fall away.

* * *

In the quotation from *Daybook* that serves as the epigraph to this essay, Truitt declares January her favorite month — “when the light is plainest, least colored,”

and a new beginning awaits. Might these words imply that she also held the *Arundels*, those chilly “conceptual icebergs,” especially dear? Certainly their light — their stark whiteness — is very plain indeed, as befits paintings that are “plain enough,” the artist decided, “to function like the bits of bread that wine tasters chew between sips to clear their palates.”³⁵

The analogy is too good to resist. Yet it needs teasing out. If the *Arundels* are bread, then what aspect of her work plays the role of the wine tasters’ wine? Color, perhaps, which so often appears in the journal entries of the 1970s as the figure of bodily freedom and release. Color, as Truitt understood it, was able “to gather force within [her] somewhere” and “stream down over the columns on its own terms.”³⁶ To apply it, she “swept wide brushes over large areas,” sometimes making one long unbroken stroke.³⁷ No wonder she called herself an “action painter” and saw color as the aspect of her work that “occasionally, just takes charge.”³⁸ Color is flux. And flux? As Truitt’s work demonstrates, it is as heady as wine.

NOTES

1. Anne Truitt, *Daybook: The Journal of an Artist* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 113.
2. Truitt’s ambivalent relationship to contemporary feminism deserves a study of its own. On the one hand, she was unsympathetic to the radicalism of 1970s feminism, as well as to its separatism, noting “Did Not Answer” on an invitation to submit slides for a planned 1971 exhibition “Women Choose Women.” (Curated by Lucy R, Lippard, the show was held at the New York Cultural Center in 1973.) Also in 1971, she circled the salutation “Ms.” on a letter from André Emmerich Gallery dated December 8, 1971. Moreover, her opposition to the label “woman artist” was strong enough to prompt her to refuse the promised honorarium for a lecture she gave in February 1976 at the Yale School of Art and Architecture because the dean of the school introduced her using the term. On the other hand, she would eventually bring suit against her employer, the University of Maryland, for salary discrimination, a suit she won.
3. *Daybook*, 3. These phrases are from a brief untitled preface dated September 1981.
4. Ibid., 4.
5. Ibid., 5.
6. In fall 2013 Scribner will publish an electronic edition of all three books under the title *Daybook, Turn, Prospect: The Journey of an Artist*.
7. *Daybook*, 177 (June 1978).
8. Truitt was wary of her books being used to interpret her art. In *Prospect: The Journal of an Artist* (New York: Scribner, 1996), she observes, in reference to an essay on her work by Brooks Adams, “I generally feel uncomfortable with any personalizing of art criticism, and doubly uncomfortable because it is peculiarly common, and subtly condescending, in criticism addressed to the art of women”(89). She disapprovingly cites Adams’s description of the “emotional tenor” of her 1977 sculpture *Nicea* as reaching “an almost hysterical pitch.” Truitt’s comments refer to Adams’s article “Solid Color” in *Art in America*, October 1991, 113–15.
9. *Daybook*, 10 (June 3, 1974) and 24 (July 2, 1974).
10. Ibid., 163 (April 30, 1975). One of the earliest expressions of this concept comes in the application Truitt submitted to the Guggenheim Foundation in 1967, a draft of which is in the Truitt Papers at Bryn Mawr College, in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania:

I came to realize that although these vivid [crossed out] memories had instigated the work the actual content was a certain relationship between the structure of the work, its weight and form, and the colors with which I began to paint them. I found that I could, I thought, illuminate this relationship by attempting to contradict the structure with the color.
[...]

I would use the grant to continue to investigate the relationship between structure and color.

In order to feel my way I seem to need structures large enough to take fields of color.

These structures have to be perfectly made, out of mahogany plywood of the finest quality or aluminum, and they are expensive to construct. They are then painted with between ten and fifteen coats of paint, some protective, but with the final coat in Liquitex.

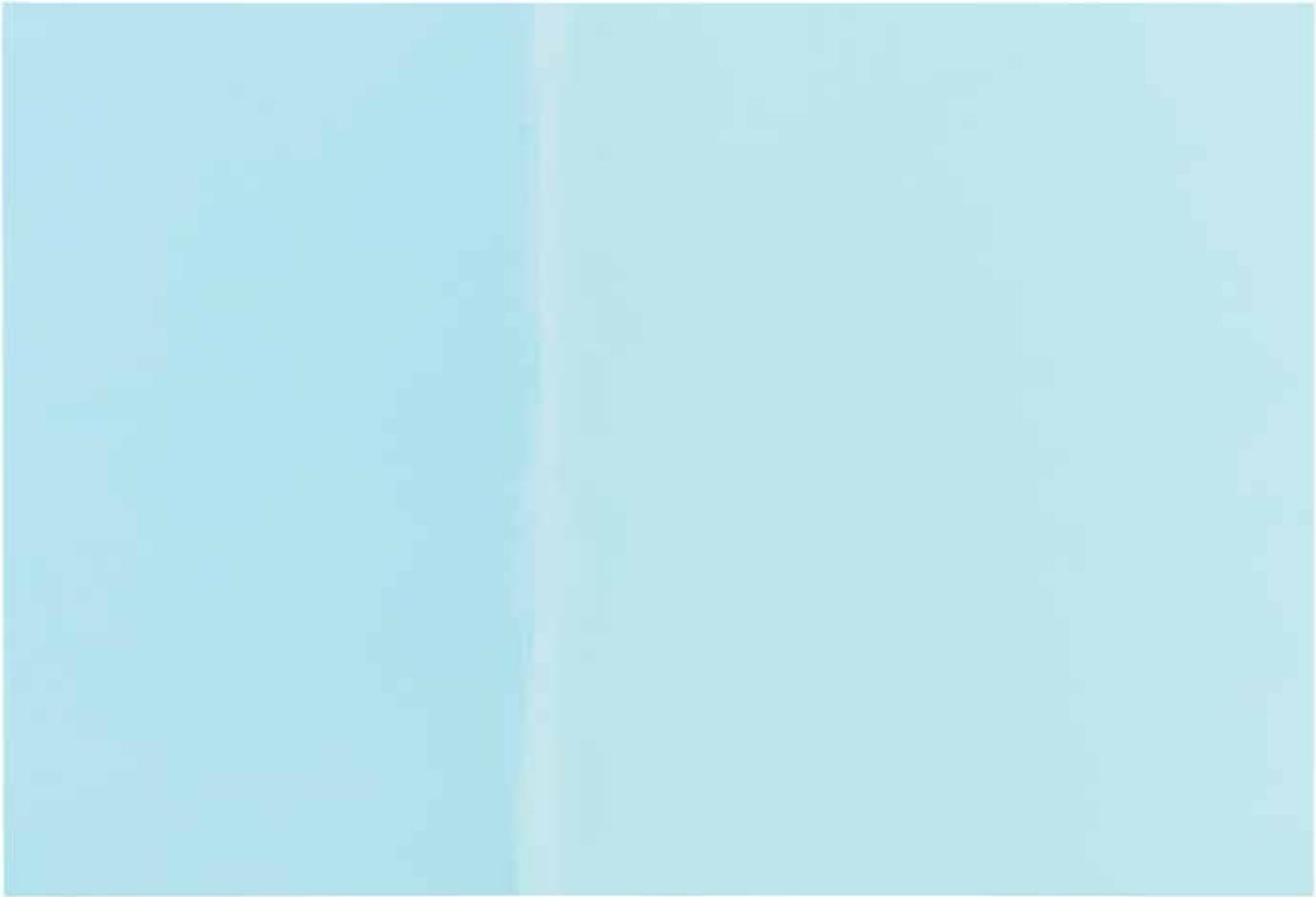
11. In Clement Greenberg’s most important essay on Truitt, he states that she is “one of the very, very few living sculptors who has used applied color with consistent success.” See “Changer: Anne Truitt,” in Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 290. Originally published in *Vogue*, May 1968.
12. The idea of “destroying the cube” shaped a key exercise in the design color course Josef Albers taught for decades in the School of Art and Architecture at Yale University. Students were asked to construct a cardboard cube and then deploy colored paper on its surface to make the structure seem to disappear.
13. Jane Harrison Cone, *Anne Truitt*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: Pyramid Galleries, 1971), n.p.
14. Truitt was of course aware of the advantages that writing presents. In *Turn*, 21, she spells out what differentiates *Daybook* from her visual art: “In it I am speaking English, a legible language. What I have said in it is being more understood than misunderstood. By contrast, I realize now how few people can read meaning in the visual syntax of art.”
15. “Anne Truitt, interviewed by Howard Fox,” *Sun and Moon* 1 (Winter 1976), 47. Although a one-page interview with Truitt was published in Tokyo in 1964, her exchange with Fox is the first substantive account she gave of her work, and formulates many key ideas she would return to for years to come.
16. Ibid.
17. James Meyer, “The Bicycle,” in Kristen Hileman, ed., *Anne Truitt: Perception and Reflection* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2009), 55–6.
18. *Daybook*, 80–1 (October 10, 1974); 29 (July 13, 1974).
19. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this section continues with reflections on Truitt’s mother and father: the former, cool, dignified, and reserved; the latter, who “loved me more than anyone else in the world.” *Daybook*, 29–30 (July 13, 1974).
20. *Daybook*, 88 (October 24, 1974).
21. Ibid., 89.
22. These phrases come from the conversation with Fox, op. cit., 41.
23. Ibid.
24. Greenberg, “Changer: Anne Truitt,” 290.
25. *Daybook*, 30 (July 14, 1974).
26. Ibid., 52 (August 21, 1974).
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 30 (July 14, 1974).
29. Ibid.
30. Kristen Hileman, “Presence and Abstraction,” in Hileman, ed., *Anne Truitt: Perception and Reflection*, 35.
31. *Daybook*, 123 (January 20, 1975). In reporting on her discussion with the physicist, and on its implications for a viewer of the *Arundel* paintings, Truitt uses the terms *foveal* and *nonfoveal* vision.
32. Although some of the *Arundel* canvases are decidedly large — 44 ¾ by 90 ¼ inches — others are considerably smaller. *Arundel XXVII* (1975), for example, measures 20 ¾ x 21 ¼ inches.
33. For a brief discussion of the reception of the 1975 Baltimore show, see Hileman, “Presence and Abstraction,” 38–9. The articles mentioned in the text were both published on February 9, 1975, and are by R. P. Harris (*Baltimore News American*) and Barbara Gold (*Baltimore Sun*).
34. *Daybook*, 99 (November 18, 1974).
35. Ibid.
36. *Daybook*, 82 (October 12, 1974).
37. *Prospect*, 22.
38. For Truitt’s self-description as an “action painter,” see Fox, 46. For color taking charge, see *Daybook*, 163 (April 30, 1975).

24 Aug '70, 1970
Acrylic and graphite on paper
23 x 29 inches; 58 x 74 cm



Landfall, 1970
Acrylic on wood
73 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 23 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 24 inches; 186 x 61 x 61 cm





25 July '71, 1971

Acrylic on linen

29 x 42 1/4 inches; 74 x 107 cm



15 Jan '71, 1971

Acrylic and graphite on paper
23 x 29 inches; 58 x 74 cm

Sun Flower, 1971
Acrylic on wood
72 x 12 x 12 inches; 183 x 31 x 31 cm



7 July '73, 1973
Acrylic and graphite on paper
22 x 30 inches; 56 x 76 cm



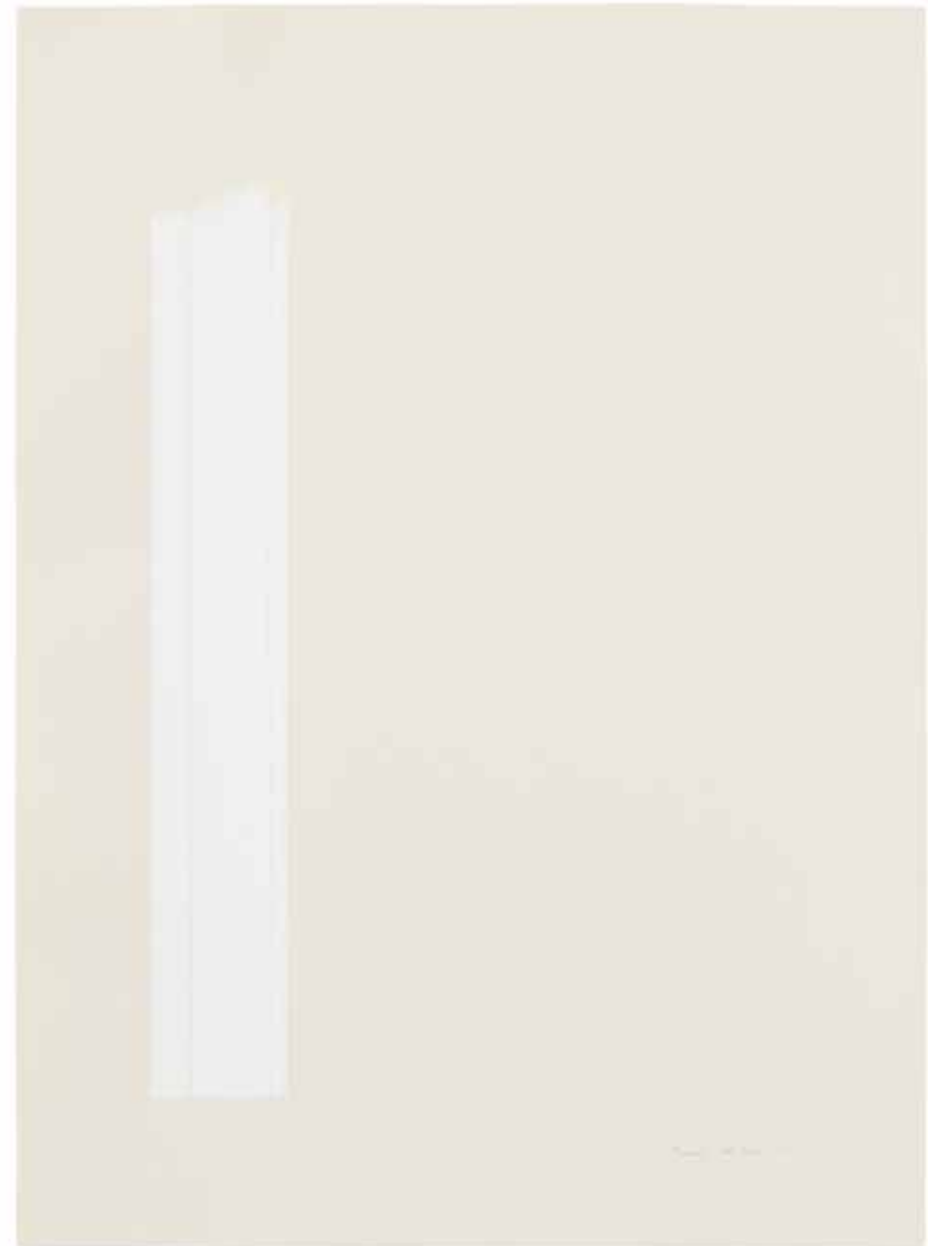


26 July '73, 1973
Acrylic and graphite on paper
22 x 30 inches; 56 x 76 cm

13 July '73 No. 2, 1973
Acrylic and graphite on paper
22 x 30 inches; 56 x 76 cm



14 July '73 No. 1, 1973
Acrylic and graphite on paper
30 x 22 inches; 76 x 56 cm



Morning Child, 1973
Acrylic on wood
72 x 12 x 12 inches; 183 x 31 x 31 cm





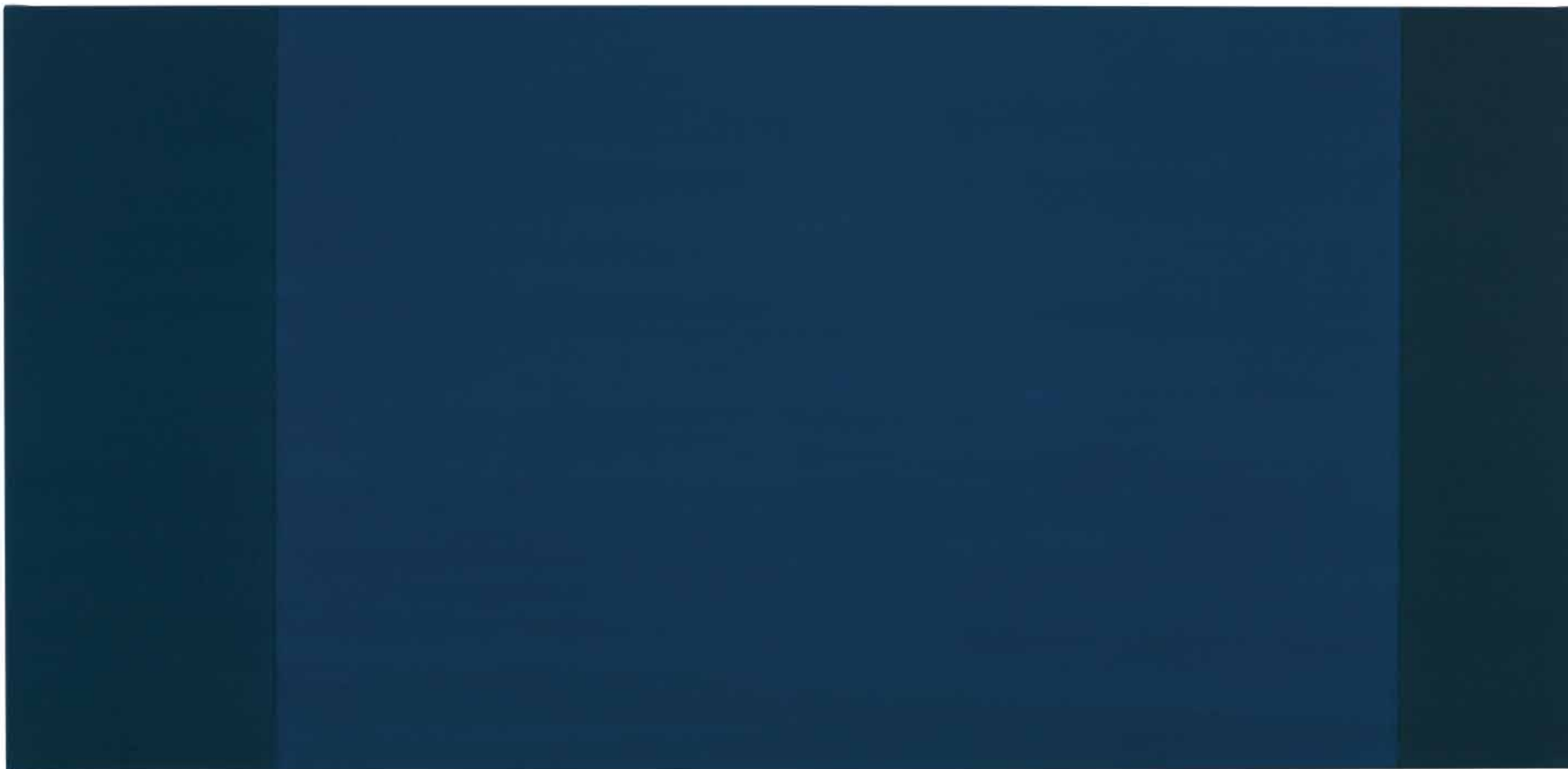
Echo, 1973
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 144 inches; 122 x 366 cm



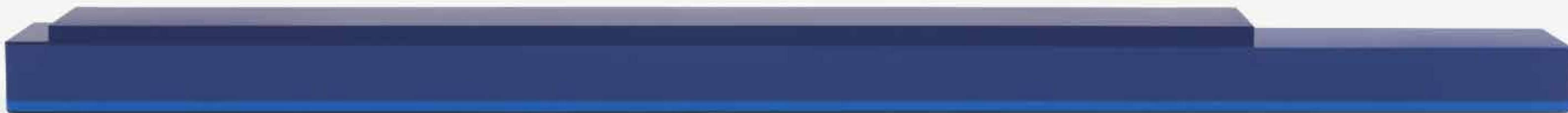
Brunt XIV, 1974
Acrylic on canvas
18 x 92 inches; 46 x 234 cm

Brunt II, 1974
Acrylic on canvas
60½ x 36¾ inches; 154 x 93 cm

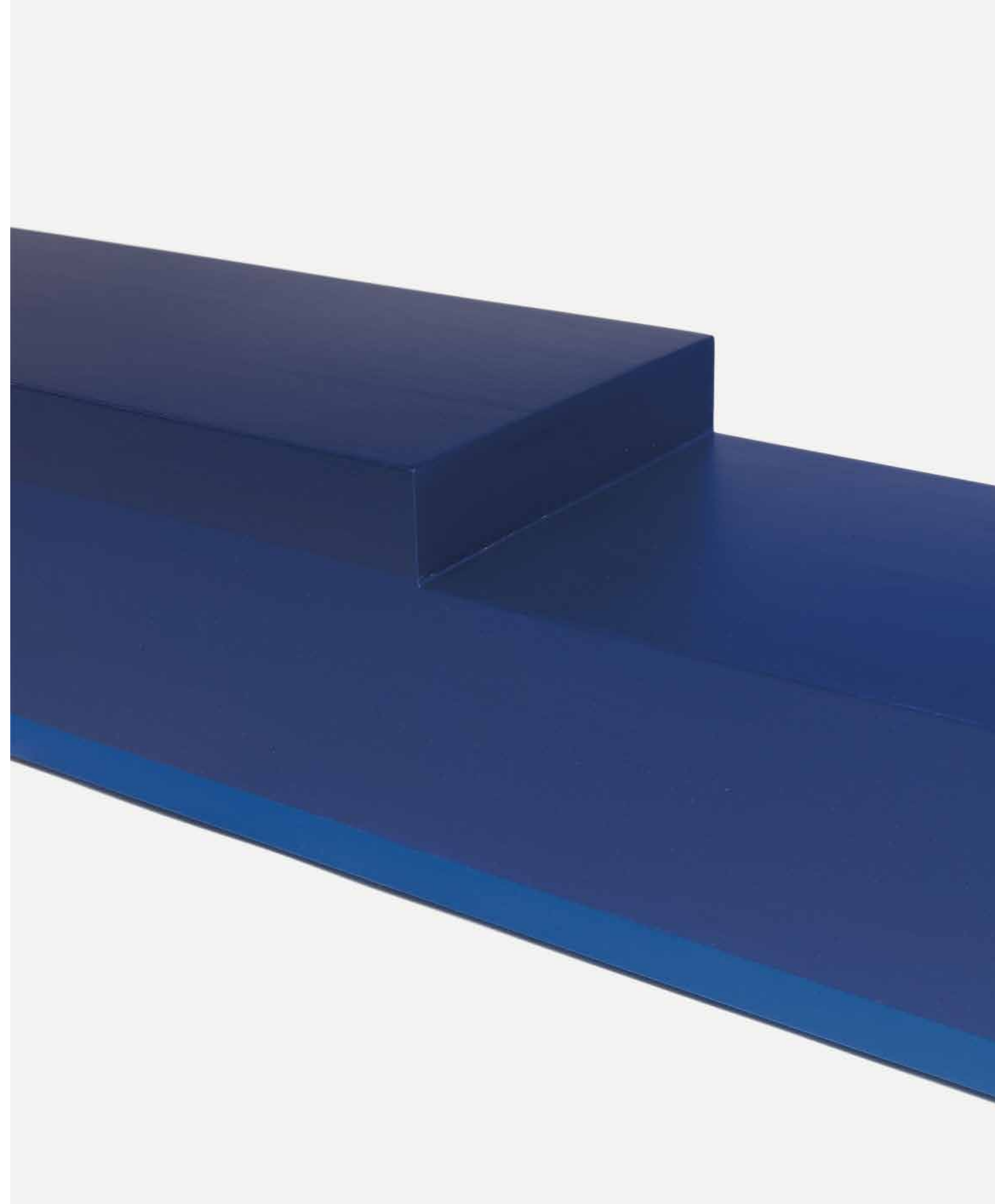




Brunt III, 1974
Acrylic on canvas
43½ x 89⅞ inches; 111 x 227 cm



Remembered Sea, 1974
Acrylic on wood
8¼ x 144 x 9½ inches; 21 x 366 x 24 cm



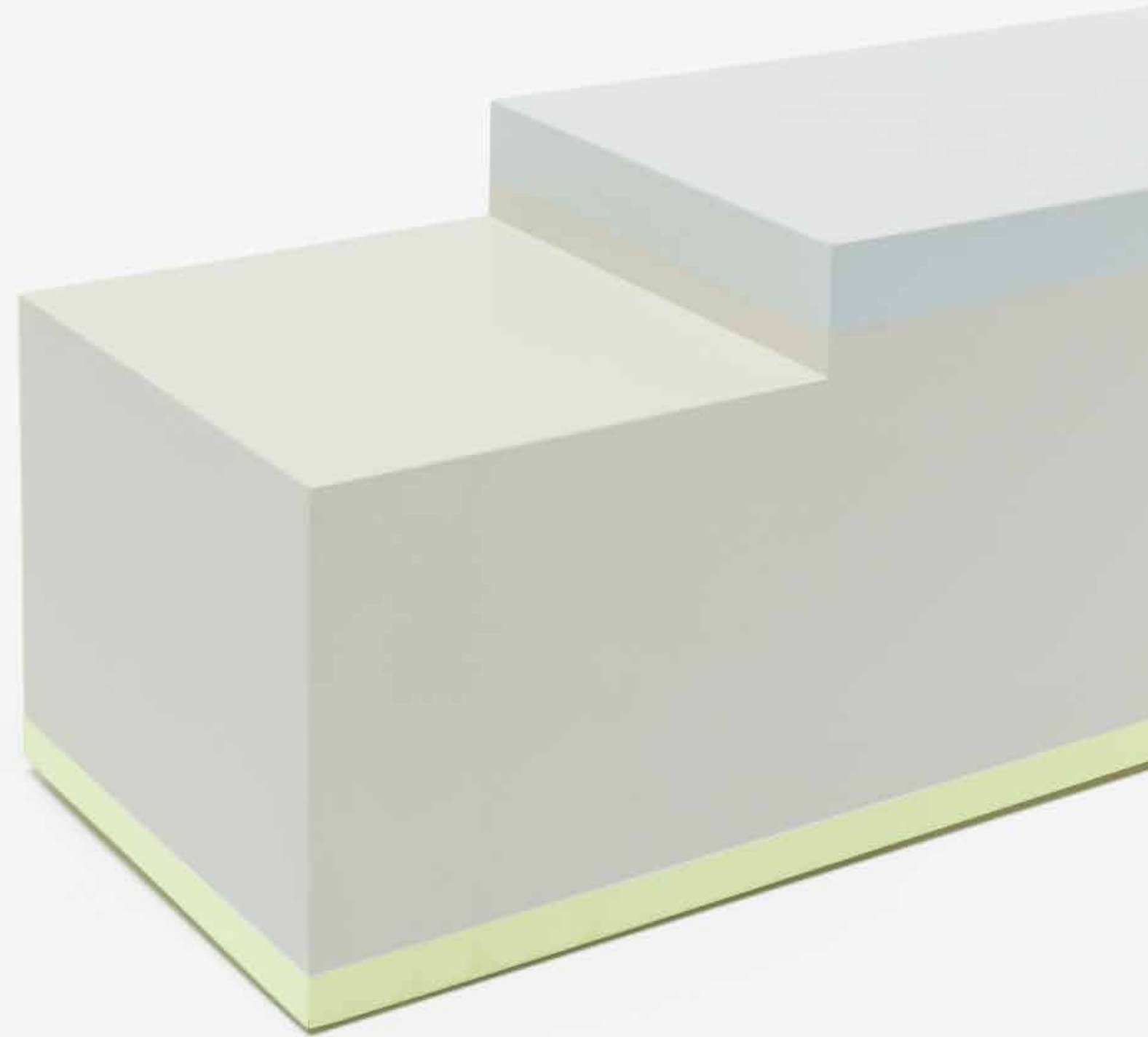


Grant, 1974
Acrylic on wood
7½ x 144 x 9½ inches; 19 x 366 x 24 cm





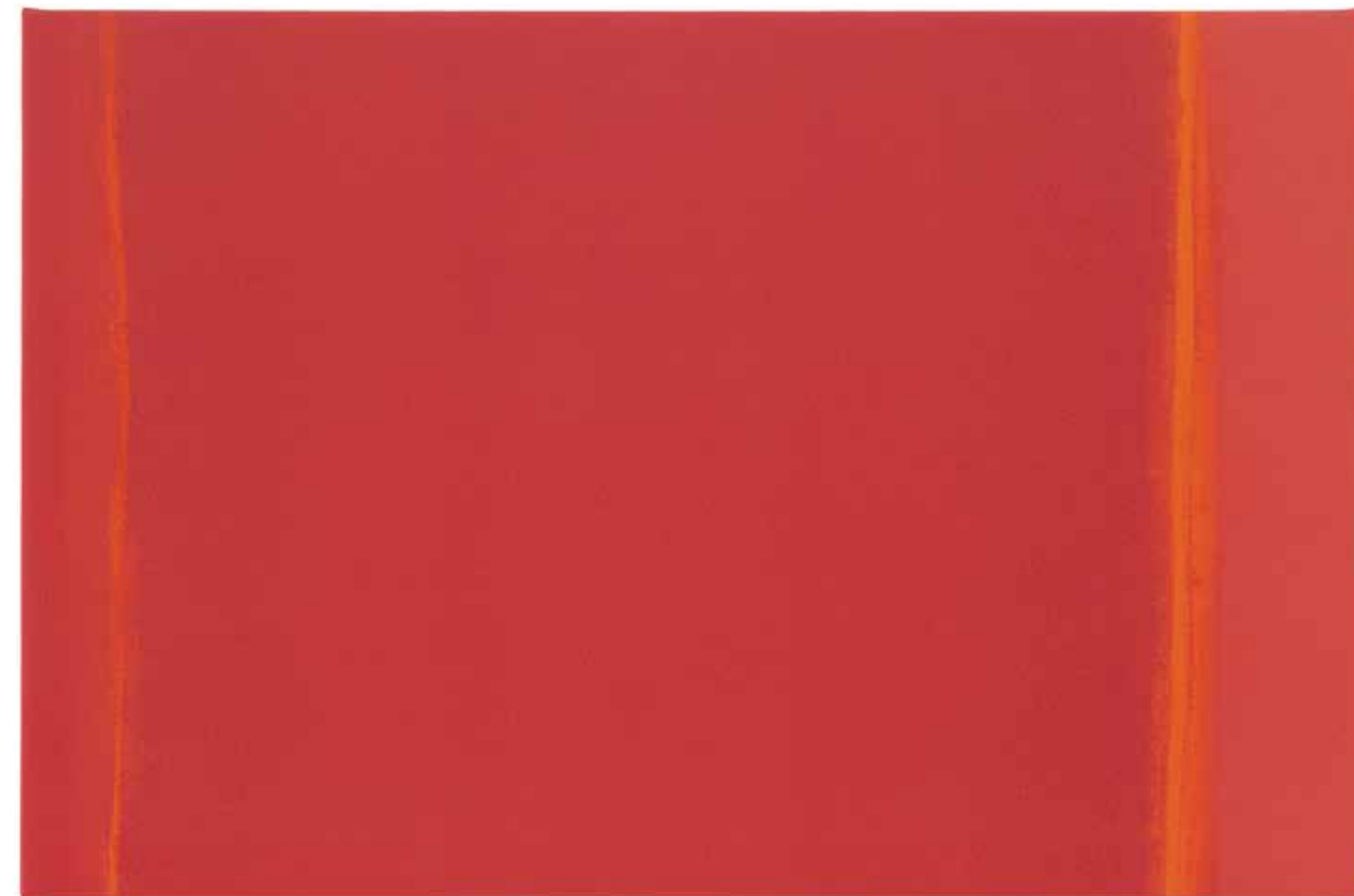
Milkweed Run, 1974
Acrylic on wood
8¾ x 120 x 8 inches; 22 x 305 x 20 cm





Way III, 1974
Acrylic on canvas
40 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 87 inches; 104 x 221 cm

Way VIII, 1974
Acrylic on canvas
20 x 30 inches; 51 x 76 cm



Lecture, February 2, 1975

Anne Truitt

To endure is not — alas — always to prevail.

A mystery confounds the problem of work in art, which is that it is simply not enough. High art is not *necessarily* the reward of hard work. But we have to *act* as if it were, just as we have to act today as if we were going to be alive tomorrow.

How does work work, what does it do for us? One element which seems to be clear is that the capacity to work feeds on itself in a developmental way, that is, it has its own line of growth, and this line can be depended on. From 1948 to 1961, I worked out of obsession, but an obsession often served by guilt. I felt uneasy if I missed a day in the studio, as if I hadn't done my duty. In 1961, when I was fortunate enough to see my way clear before me in a range of work which I recognized as categorically my own, the guilt dropped away, to my total astonishment. In its place came a perfectly peaceful conviction of competence. I imagine it's what a doctor must feel when he is awakened in the middle of the night by a patient. He is *there*, a doctor, his knowledge at his command. I can only assume that this sudden assurance was a kind of coalescence, a catalytic distillation of the years during which I dragged my feet to the studio every day no matter whether I wanted to or not.

Most artists work hard, it seems to me. But I sometimes notice a sort of more or less conscious cut-off point. (The artist can be badly weakened by this kind of unconscious reservation.) It can be a point in time — “I'll work at this until I am twenty-one, twenty-five, thirty, forty...” — or in effort — “I'll work three hours a day or five hours or ten hours” — or a point in pleasure — “I'll work unless...” — and here the “enemies of promise” really move in.

These are personal decisions, more or less at individual will. They hang on the artist's scale of values, and on his character. It has always seemed to me that so-called talent is relatively ordinary. But the capacity to fail and persevere for ten or so years is rather rare.

And no matter how the artist holds his own line of purpose, his result is in jeopardy. He may have a crippling accident, or may suddenly have to support circumstances which drain his vital force, or may find himself caught in a situation which wipes out a cultural context on which he depends. Even the most fortunate have to adjust the demands of daily life with the demands of personal obsession.

This adjustment is tricky, and I thought I would say a few words about my own experience with it. When I began working in art in 1948, I was married and had to fit my hours into a schedule of shopping, cooking, housecleaning, entertaining, and — very often — moving from city to city. In 1955 I had my first child, followed by two more, in 1958 and 1960. By 1961, when my work suddenly became clear before me and totally preemptory, I had a large and complicated set-up within which I had to operate.

My husband was a very active journalist, which meant a lot of time-consuming entertaining and being entertained; plus the fact that he was a hospitable person and we had houseguests rather continually. I was expected to enter into his life with

a commitment to his career, and felt I should do so, in the context of marriage. Having been traditionally brought up, it didn't occur to me to fight the situation. I simply took it for granted that I had to fit what I wanted to do into it.

My children were at this time six, three and one. Their care came first. Doctors' appointments, reading to them, rocking the baby to sleep, carpools — all that had to be done, and done well, before I could turn to myself.

What I did was to raise the ante on myself. I got up very early and used every single second of the day, trying not to rush and not stopping. I would do things like cook the dinner at 6 AM before the house was overrun with people. And whatever time I had, I spent in the studio. If it was fifteen minutes, then it was fifteen minutes. If it was three hours — and it almost never was — it was three hours.

It helped me that I understood my own rather rigidly conscientious nature well enough to organize my priorities so that I wouldn't feel that I was neglecting my primary duties, which seemed to me to be my husband and children. I did what I had to do from the first, and then felt free to pursue my own ends.

The reason for all this finagling and effort is that an artist has to produce enough work to see who he is. It seems to me that he only has this way to find out. His work will teach him, if he can bring himself to do his work.

The paintings now on display upstairs in the museum are parts of a series I call *Arundel*. In them I have set forth as directly as possible, allowing them to command their own space, certain relationships which I have noticed. In them, I have used the freedom which two-dimensional painting allows. The relationships open into space, as you may have noticed, in a way impossible for an object, which is always limited by its very object-ness. I regard them as inflections of my sculpture.

A final word about the pursuit of art. First, it is a pursuit, a voyage of discovery. Secondly, it can also be such a voyage for the observer. The artist places his life in the service of his fellow men. He distills its essence as best he can, and takes the *responsibility* for the risky business. Self-oriented as this pursuit necessarily is, he can, if he is successful, illuminate for others as well as for himself. This is, very basically, his hope — and perhaps his occasional reward.

Baltimore Museum of Art



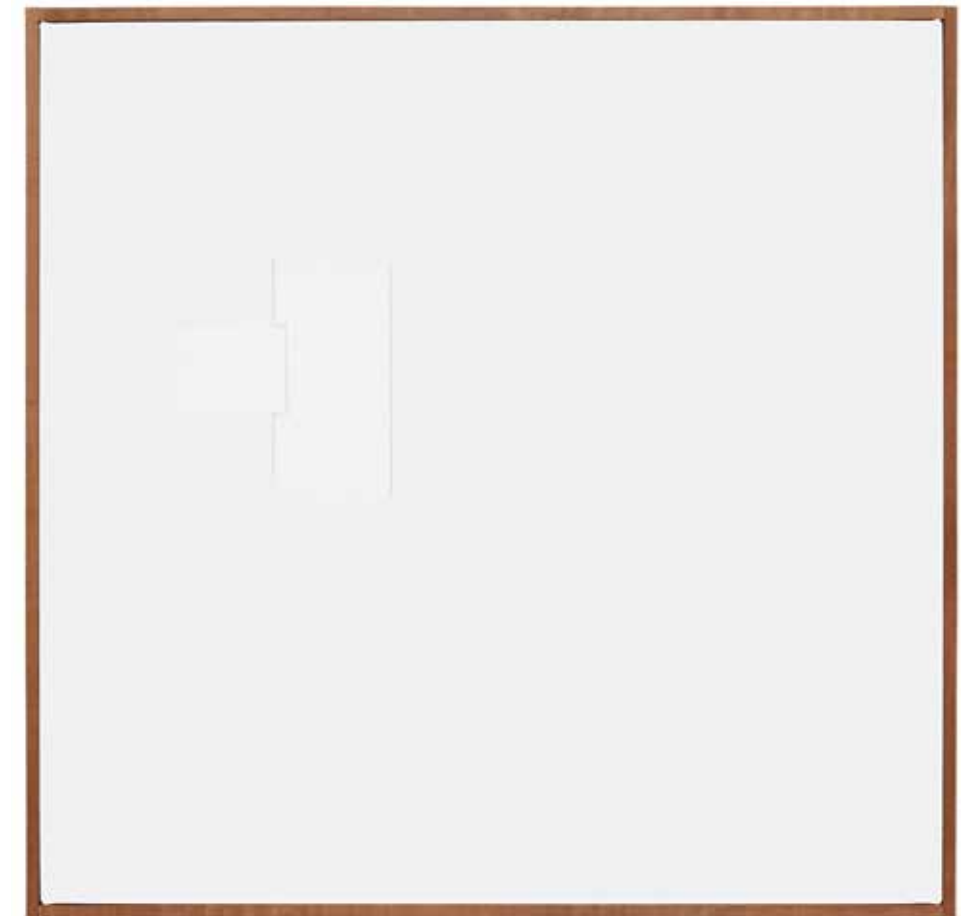
Arundel XVII, 1975
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
23 1/4 x 32 1/4 inches; 59 x 82 cm



Arundel XXV, 1975
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
44¾ x 90¾ inches; 114 x 229 cm

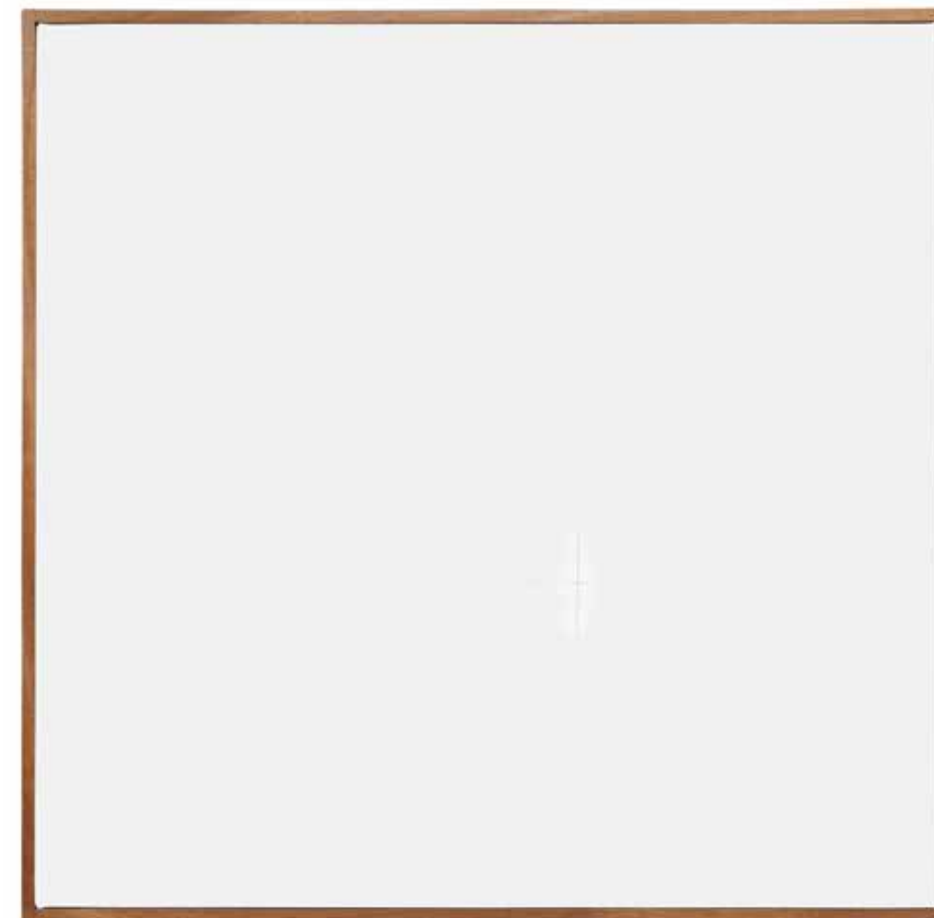
Arundel XXVI, 1975
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
91 ¾ x 26 ¾ inches; 233 x 68 cm





Arundel XXVII, 1975
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
20¾ x 21 ¼ inches; 53 x 54 cm

Arundel XXX, 1975
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
20¾ x 21 ¼ inches; 53 x 54 cm



Single, 1975
Acrylic on wood
46¾ x 54 x 13¾ inches; 119 x 137 x 34 cm





Essay II, 1976

Anne Truitt

When I was in the seventh grade, I wrote a report on how perfume was made in France. Fields and fields of flowers — and there were pictures, in vivid, improbable colors, of wagons heaped with mountains of blossoms — were, by a lengthy and precisely demanding process, distilled into single drops of fluid which smelled of them all, in a proportion at once true to themselves and to a human concept of beauty. So it seems to me that art is made. The artist's life distills into an objectivity which can, given certain circumstances, reveal the just proportion of an individual life to human life in general, and may point beyond to a universality with which human life is itself in just proportion. Heaps of experiences, in themselves specific, detailed, and vivid, yield their unity in forms which, if the artist is granted grace, can reveal the essence of an individual life. Each work holds that essence, and the whole work of a lifetime traces the single distillations which mark its progress in time.

A person stands on the earth, subject to the events of being human. These events demand to be understood and, occasionally, to be withstood. My sculptures withstand, to hold within themselves parts of my experience for my own learning. Thus fixed for my contemplation, my experience is in the service of my understanding as it develops in time. My work clears the way behind me, so to speak, so I can advance in the light of its being, and this is a being which, despite my best efforts, evades my comprehension. In my work, I move from the unknown to the unknown, but with the sustenance of its company, its intimate nature strengthening my intent to hold to that most intimate nerve of myself, out of which the work has arisen, mysteriously.

In the early 1960s, the urgency of my passion to hold my life in stillnesses was so intense that the work stood fast, stubbornly repelling the rush of time. As time took me further, I loosened enough to flow with time itself, and found its implications appearing in the work. I found a fascination with the ever-receding subtleties of color and the lightness of brushstrokes which themselves objectify the time it took to make them. In *Spring Snow*, for example, the icy green falls from the top of the sculpture through the tender air of early spring onto the warming earth below, which flattens itself to receive it. In my paintings, I mark the encounters — the meetings, the partings, the cataclysms, the tender touches — which are the essential points of our lives. It does not, in my experience, take much to mark these points. A glance will do, a scarcely perceptible turning of the body toward or against. Apprehension of a real event, crucial in its effects, can be as light as the echo of a single flower caught into a scent which holds it replete in a new context.

The context of art is, for me, the context of human life itself. I catch its fleeting points as best I can. I fail, and expect to continue to fail. In hot pursuit, I can, paradoxically, only watch from my own still center, learning from what I make.

From *Anne Truitt: Sculpture and Painting*
(Charlottesville: University of Virginia Art Museum, 1976), 5–6

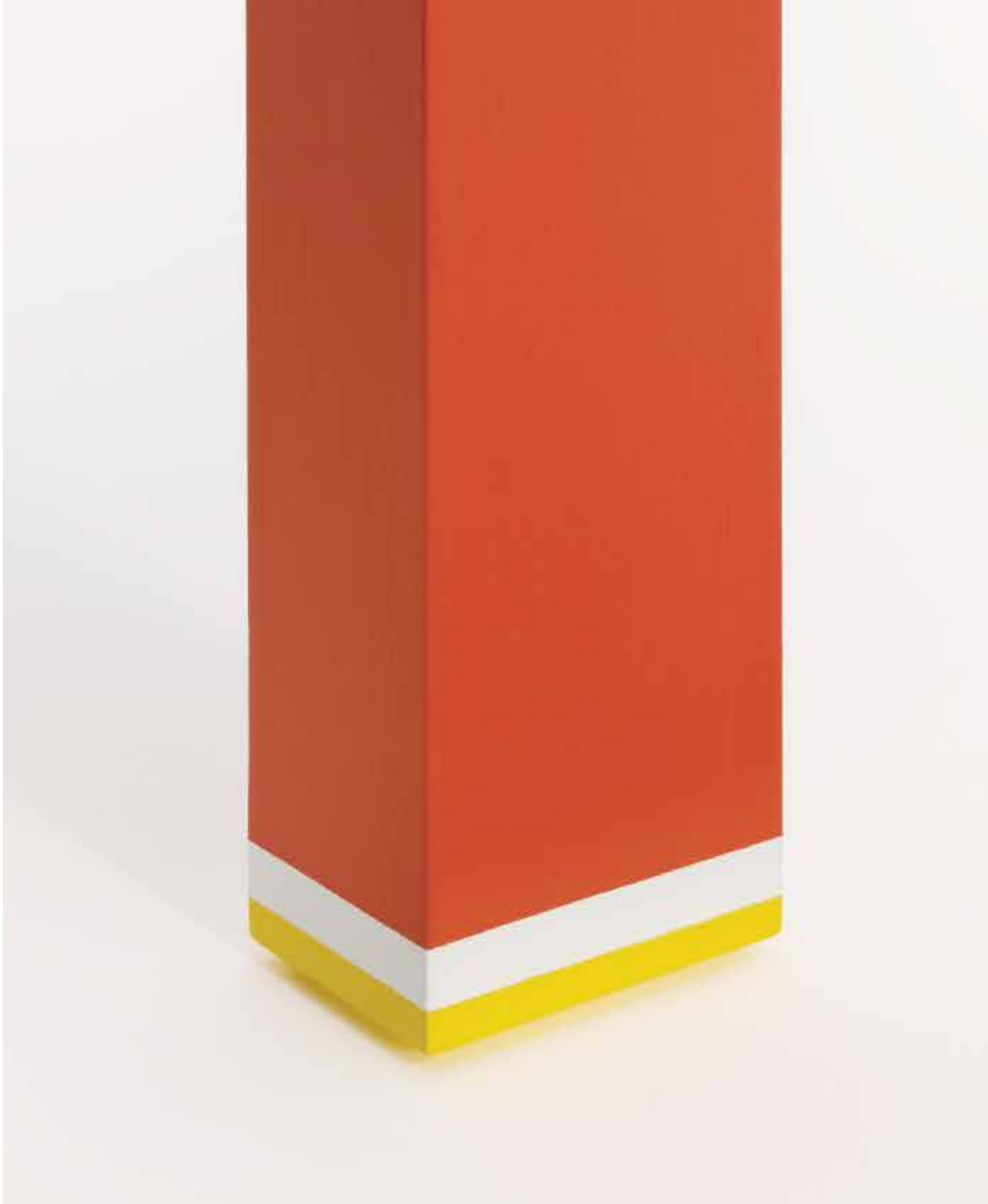


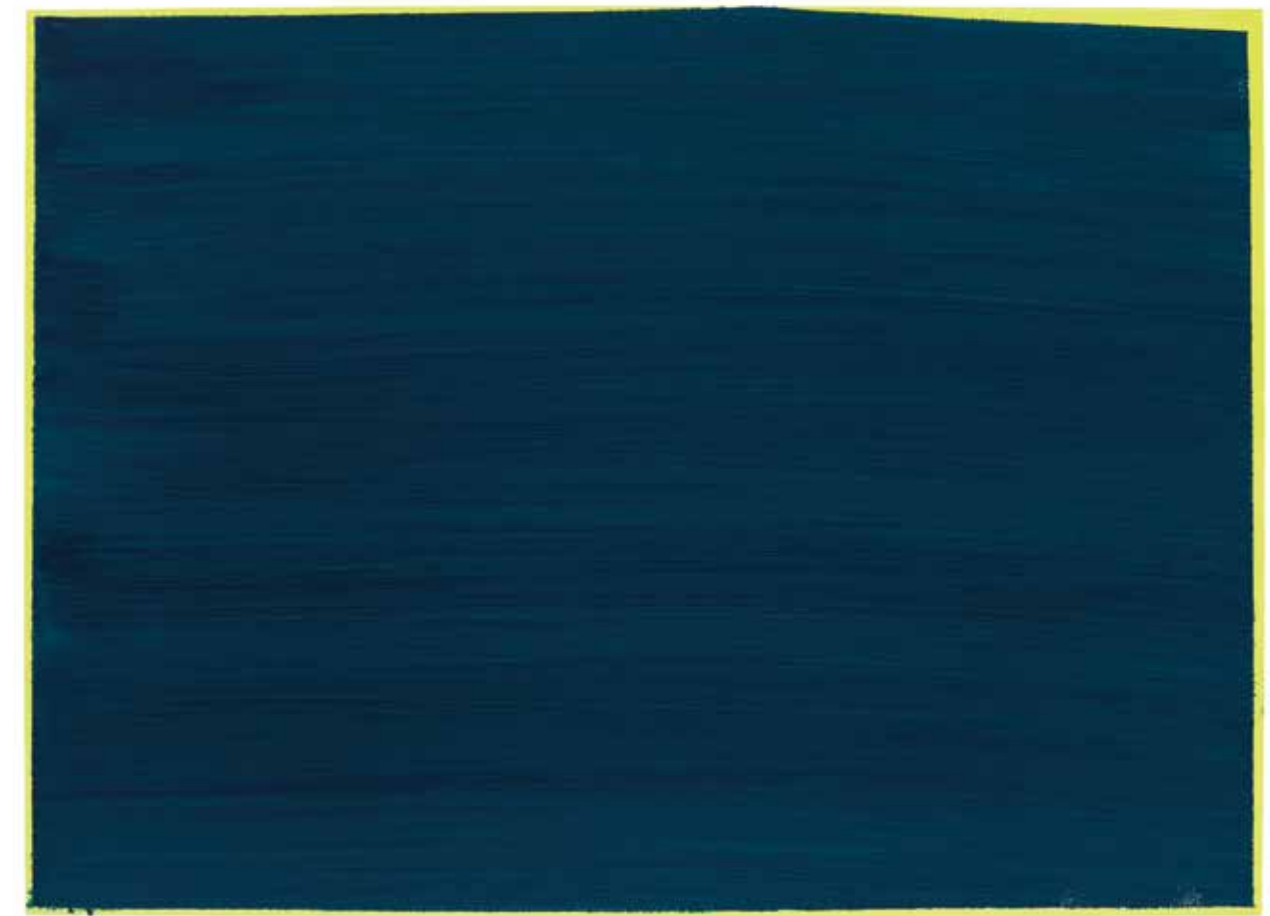


Shear No. 2, 1976
Acrylic on paper
22 x 30 inches; 56 x 76 cm

Jaunt, 1977
Acrylic on wood
60 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 4 inches; 153 x 14 x 10 cm







Shear No. 10, 1976
Acrylic on paper
22 x 30 inches; 56 x 76 cm

Lecture, September 23, 1978

Anne Truitt

One hears endlessly repeated that reproach by the powers-that-be toward the less fortunate artists who ask their favor: “there are too many artists!” Doubtless, there are too many of those without talent, on the whole too much bad work; but if the recompenses and benefits were distributed with impartiality and judgment and especially with regard to spiritual needs... there would not be too many artists. It is not the abundance of the artists which causes the misfortune... it is the too-small number of enlightened amateurs and true connoisseurs who would consecrate a part of their wealth to the encouragement of the arts and artists, rather than speculating on the needs of one who is so miserable as to have to accept the prices offered for his works.

— Pierre-Nolasque Bergeret,
Letters of an Artist on the State of the Arts in France, Paris, 1848

This wail of complaint falls all too familiarly on the ears of those of us concerned with the state of the arts. It could have been written in 1978. It was, in fact, written by Pierre-Nolasque Bergeret in his book *Letters of an Artist on the State of the Arts in France*, published in 1848, 130 years ago. It is the voice of an artist confronted by a world which has failed to offer an institutional system within which art can be absorbed justly and intelligently. Before addressing myself to the problem about which he complains, I would like to consider the complaint itself. Specifically, the tone of the complaint.

To my ear, it has a whine incompatible with the nobility implicit in the pursuit of the artist. This pursuit is, ipso facto, an individual pursuit, undertaken in a singular sense. Singular not only in that it is undertaken by a single person within the inner chambers of his or her being, but also singular in that it is, in the highest meaning, the acceptance of grace. The artist does not actually choose art; art chooses the artist. A person can decide to become, say, a lawyer, train diligently, work intelligently, and have a reasonable hope of success. Bringing into being art of any quality remains a mystery. As Jack Tworikov, an artist whose work is undoubtedly familiar to most of you, once expressed it: “I work on a painting, I finish it, and then I stand back and look at it, and sometimes it looks all right. And that’s a little touch of grace.”

In this context, the artist necessarily stands in jeopardy. The central fact of this jeopardy is, of course, that no amount of hard work in the studio will guarantee that the work will be of quality. Whenever we speak of art, it seems to me that we must remember that the artist lives with this fact. Like Prometheus, the human who stole fire from the gods and was punished by being chained on a mountaintop, immobile under the attack of a vulture who ate out his heart and was able to do so each day because the heart grew whole again each night, the artist beckons the wrath of the gods when he challenges their power to create. I say that we should remember this fact of jeopardy when we speak of art and artists, but I also say that the artist has the responsibility of thinking clearly about the situation. There is nothing which gives him or her the right to be understood, to be welcomed, to be nourished, to be cherished by society. There is nothing which bestows upon the artist the right to wail about whatever results accrue to the work he or she produces. The real rewards

must be recognized as belonging strictly within the four walls of the studio. They must arise out of the joy of making the work itself.

So today, as we address ourselves to the business aspects of art, to those problems which lie outside the studio and have to do with what happens to art in the world, I believe we would be wise to maintain clearly in the backs of our minds the plain fact that the artist works alone in the studio. In the last analysis, success or failure in the worldly sense are irrelevant to this entirely individual passion. No matter what the world has to say about the work produced, the artist is always essentially alone in an ideal pursuit. This is a privilege. The price is high. But the rewards are incomparable. Rauschenberg once remarked that he was a depraved person, that he had tried all of the ways of sensuous pleasure and that art was the greatest “high” of all.

It is precisely for this reason — because the artist presents to public view his or her highest self at the apogee of its height — that the feelings of artists are so vulnerable to criticism. Behind the whine of Bergeret’s complaint is a genuine wail of pain. It just plain hurts to present one’s self turned inside out to the public gaze and to find it scorned. Or misunderstood. Or — and here we approach the topic of our discussion today — turned to the uses of merchants. Merchants who may themselves in turn suffer in a way not unlike the way artists suffer. A New York dealer, André Emmerich, recently remarked that he often found himself the butt of hostility. “We, the art dealers, are the moneychangers in the temple,” he said. Art objects indeed are in some sense icons, objects imbued with meaning akin to spiritual value. It smacks of blasphemy to thrust them into the hurly-burly of buying and selling. Yet there has to be some way to interface the artist and the public, lest the artist fall into solipsism and the public be deprived of the aspiration art can evoke.

Our present institutions for handling this interface have historical precedents which I would like briefly to consider. At the beginning of the seventeenth century in France, the medieval guilds controlled the apprentice system by means of which artists were educated; they also controlled the quality of the materials used by artists, held the exclusive rights to sell art and even to limit the number of practicing artists allowed to do so within their areas of jurisdiction. These rights were challenged by an increasing exchange during the seventeenth century of art and artists between France and Italy, most specifically by a rapidly developing tradition that artists be trained in Rome, thus widening their horizons and placing them beyond provincial control. Gradually opposition crystallized until in 1648 dissident artists were able to obtain from the royal government the right to set up a school of drawing, to establish what came to be called the Royal Academy. As this new monopoly slowly replaced the guild system, the artists’ social status was redefined. No longer an artisan who hawked his own wares, the artist, learned and traveled, was elevated to the position of arbiter of beauty and taste. The precepts of the Royal Academy were strict, and its power grew rapidly, centered in Paris, much as the power of the contemporary art world centers in New York. Since members of the Academy were forbidden to engage in commerce, middlemen sprang up to handle the exchange of art; these middlemen were the precursors of our contemporary dealers. Art criticism, at first unsigned, began to be published during the 1740s. The conception of art as a learned profession placed it within the realm of those subjects on which intellectual men of letters could write. And so during the eighteenth century there

developed in France the system which we now enjoy, if that is the word: the alliance of critics and dealers as interface between the artist and the public. (For a fascinating account of how this process occurred in France, I recommend to you a book entitled *Canvases and Careers* by Harrison and Cynthia White.)

I have gone into this brief history in order to lead up to my own observation that we seem now to be in the process of breaking up the monopoly of this alliance. Artists are returning to the guild practice of selling their own works out of their studios, of forming cooperatives for selling work, of exploring alternative spaces for exhibition. We see increasing numbers of artists acting as curators. This is on the one hand a sort of groundswell heralding an increasing independence of stance on the part of artists, and on the other a phenomenon harking back to the Renaissance prince-patrons: the direct patronage of the government. Artists now have a vocabulary of letters — NEA, GSA — government agencies which concern themselves with the choice and promulgation of art in the interest of public consumption. At this moment the situation could be compared to Dr. Doolittle's Push-Me-Pull-You. If artists are not to find themselves in the awkward and unbecoming position of darting frantically from one end of this beast to the other, patting the head of the government as they nose out possibilities of patronage and rushing to stroke their peers who are seeking new directions, they have to think very clearly about how they wish to place their work. They have to articulate the values they hold dear and then to adhere to them in the face of inevitable economic and psychological pressures.

I now turn to address myself directly to the practical considerations about which I have been asked to speak to you today. In my own experience of working and exhibiting, I have found it useful to make a distinction between the studio and the world and to maintain that distinction not only in mind but also in my actions. For example, I do not allow, as a general rule, visitors to my studio. That area remains private to me alone. I do not think of results in the studio. When a work is finished, I take my hand off it and, metaphorically speaking, move it into a separate part of my mind. There I consider it in relation to the whole complex context of my experience of exhibiting. I bring to bear what might be called ordinary intelligence in contradistinction to intuitive intelligence, the kind of intelligence one might use to pick out an apple to eat rather than the kind one would use to study an apple painted by Cézanne. In a practical sense, the knowledge an artist needs to handle his or her work in the world is folk knowledge; it is passed from one artist to another, from one generation of artists to another. There are all sorts of details — the recording of work, the photographing of it with the resultant marking and storage of slides, transportation, storage, insurance, paper transactions of various sorts. Files have to be kept. Supplies have to be bought. Letters have to be written. Logistical decisions have to be made. Essentially, the artist has to be a good quartermaster. The mounting of a large exhibit is a systems analysis operation, requiring endless patience with details, a cool head for the inevitable crises, and a moral fortitude which endures until the exhibit finally stands completed as visualized by the artist.

If you know a person well, if you respect him and wish other people to become acquainted with him, you consider him in the context of your knowledge of the other people around you and make decisions based on compatibility. This, it seems to me, is a kind of guideline in approaching the introduction of your work to the

public. An artist can seek this kind of recognition with dignity and circumspection, without venality, without the overanxiety which usually betrays insecurity and has, almost invariably, the effect of repelling the kind of serious attention you wish. People can smell overanxiety as animals are said to be able to smell fear; they intuitively recognize that the artist is not sure about his work and they react with rejection, concluding that if the artist is uneasy there must be something to be uneasy about. It is best to remain in apprenticeship to yourself until you are sure of your work and can present it to the public with the unmistakable dignity of integrity. When this time arrives — or indeed if it arrives, as sometimes one is mistaken about one's own talent — the artist can look around and study the available options with a cool eye. One thing is certain, and that is that work of quality eventually makes its way on its own merits. Art of high quality attracts events unto itself.

When I used the word *consider* in speaking of the finished work, I used it in a context I would like to explain further. When an artist considers his or her work, it is not unlike considering a person. It is important to remember that the final decision in any personal transaction about his or her art belongs in the artist's hands. Let me repeat that. The final decision in any personal transaction about his or her art belongs in the artist's hands. The people who deal in art in the world may initiate a transaction and may birth it, so to speak, but the artist has the power to choose whether it is right or wrong to let a particular transaction come to completion. I think this fact is often forgotten. From artists one hears weak complaints about dealers and museum personnel as if they held this power, and the truth is that they do not. The artist is always accountable to his or her art.

Consideration for the work extends by extrapolation into a general consideration for the people who deal in art, for their problems, and even for collectors who may need a very special kind of understanding. It is not easy to be a collector if one is a sensitive person; one can recognize, and many collectors do so realize, that it is a delicate matter to buy a work of art, to *buy* a part of the artist's spirit.

What I am trying to present to you clearly is a situation in which the artist behaves appropriately. It is not as if he or she were in a line of battle — under attack by the world. There's no need for an aggressive stance. Once the work of art is completed, it automatically moves into the realm of an object and has to be handled in accordance with the ordinary procedures of worldly transactions. In some way the artist has to come to terms with intelligence to make the transactions appropriate to what he or she visualizes as good for the work, according to individual experience and values.

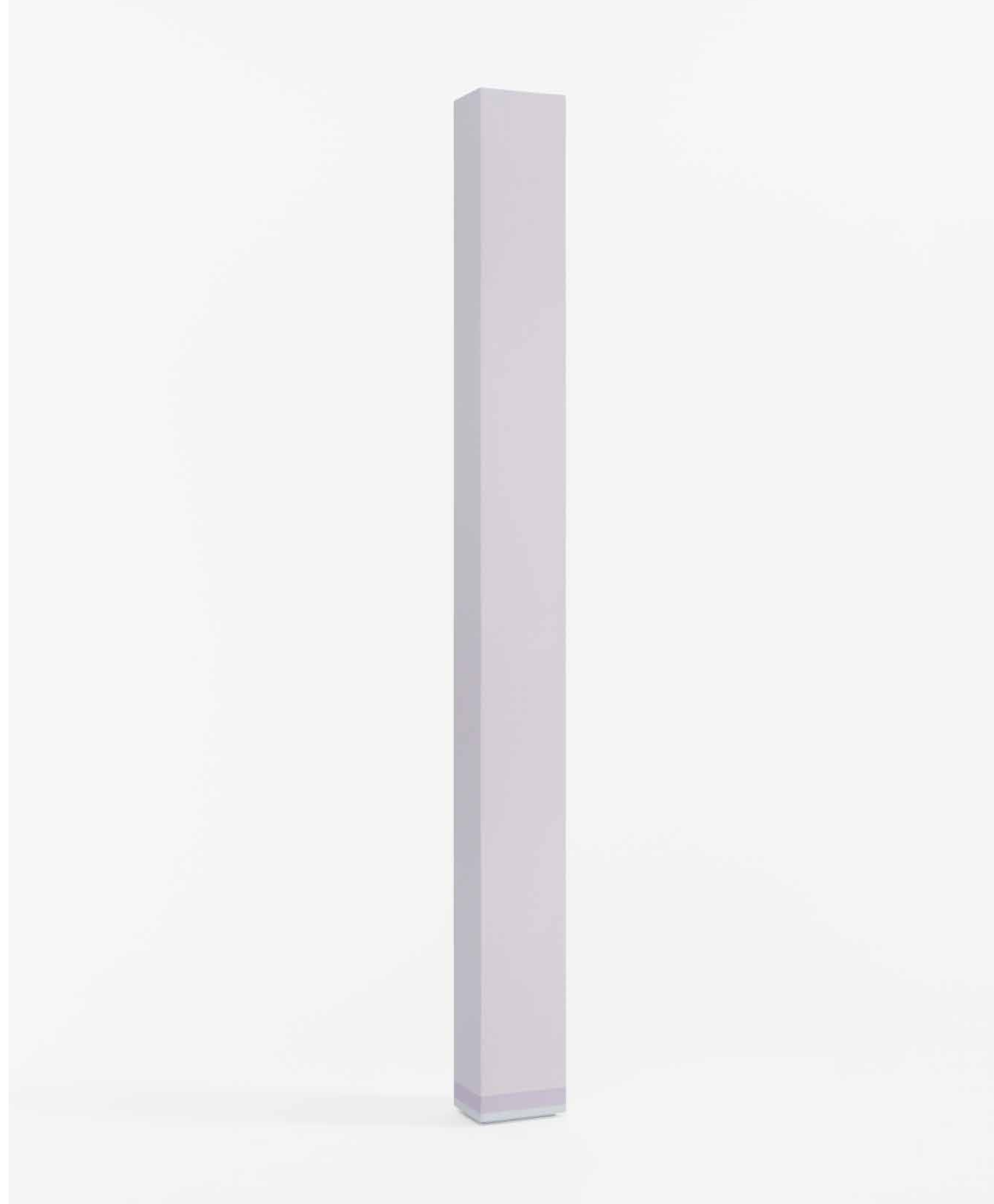
I should like to close by saying that in the last analysis the artist's work is underwritten by character. By character which has been formed in a lifelong process of growing self-knowledge, informed by widening experience. One of the exciting aspects of being an artist is precisely this kind of development. The artist takes risks and makes mistakes and then lives with the results, learns from them and moves on. If the artist is thoughtful and maintains a sturdy independence, if he or she makes an honest attempt continually to refine values in the light of experience, it is possible to live in the world productively without in any way compromising the integrity which underwrites all art.

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission Symposium,
Riverdale, Maryland

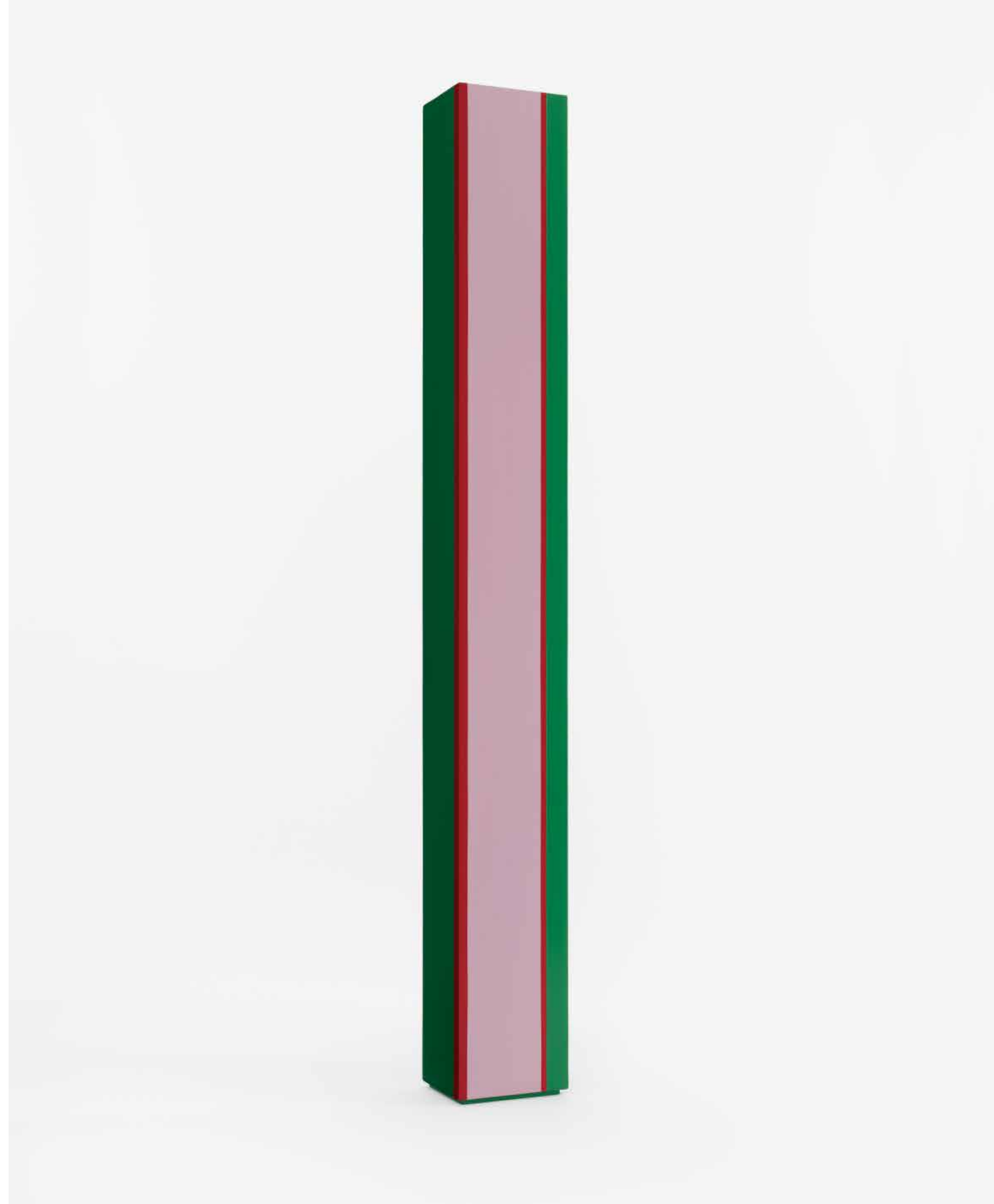
Febbraio, 1978
Acrylic on canvas
60 ¼ x 60 inches; 153 x 152 cm



Prescience, 1978
Acrylic on wood
60 x 5 x 4 inches; 152 x 13 x 10 cm



Second Requiem, 1977/1980
Acrylic on wood
84 x 8 x 10 inches; 213 x 20 x 25 cm



Daybook (excerpts), 1974–80

Anne Truitt

July 25, 1974

I now have two large plywood surfaces in Stone South and am working on them in tandem so that the series of paintings on canvas I am calling *Brunt* is coming along rapidly. They are coming out of the shear turn that presented itself to my inner eye a few weeks ago, a return to the preoccupations in my early 1960s sculpture: burnt umbers; blacks; dark, dark reds and blues and purples rammed into proportions allowing, to my eye, no room for potential change. They are for me as categorically restrictive as endurance; they are the brunt of endurance. A familiar brunt. It was only in 1967, in the exhilaration of my return from Japan to America, that it occurred to me that I could use the energy I had been putting into endurance to *change* my life. Yet the concept of brunt, of accepting and enduring, still seems to me to have a kind of nobility. It is, perhaps, less intelligent, but there is a stubborn selfhood about it that is dear to me. It can be, quite literally, the only way to survive.

October 12, 1974

This winter is bringing me to a confrontation with the truths behind truths, like the color I know to lie just beyond color.

I remember how startled I was when, early in 1962, I realized that I was becoming obsessed with color as having meaning not only in counterpoint to the structures of fences and the bulks of weights — which were, I thought, my primary concern — but also in itself, as holding meaning all its own. As I worked along, making the sculptures as they appear in my mind’s eye, I slowly came to realize that what I was actually trying to do was to take paintings off the wall, to set color free in three dimensions for its own sake. This was analogous to my feeling for the freedom of my own body and my own being, as if in some mysterious way I felt myself to *be* color. This feeling grew steadily until the setback of my experience in Japan when, in despair that my work no longer materialized somewhere in my head, I began to concentrate on the constructivist aspects of form, for me a kind of intellectual exercise. When we came back to America in 1967, I returned home to myself as well as to my country, abandoned all play with form for the austerity of the columnar structure, and let the color, which must have been gathering force within me somewhere, stream down over the columns on its own terms.

When I conceive a new sculpture, there is a magical period in which we seem to fall in love with one another. This explains to me why, when I was in Yaddo and deprived of my large pieces, I felt lonely with the same quality of loneliness I would feel for a missing lover. This mutual exchange is one of exploration on my part, and, it seems to me, on the sculpture’s also. Its life is its own. I receive it. And after the sculpture stands free, finished, I have the feeling of “oh, it was *you*,” akin to the

feeling with which I always recognized my babies when I first saw them, having made their acquaintance before their birth. This feeling of recognition lasts only a second or two, but is my ample reward.

November 2, 1974

In the last few months, I have become more conscious of how my work takes form. It sometimes happens unexpectedly. Just as I wake up, a series of three sculptures may present themselves somewhere that seems high over my head in my consciousness. They simply materialize, whole and themselves, in a rather stately way, and stand there, categorical in their simplicity. This can happen anywhere, not necessarily just after waking, but, characteristically, without any preparation on my part. Sometimes a single piece will appear; never more than three at once. I cannot make them all. Less than a quarter of them ever reach actuality.

Other pieces result from a more or less conscious concentration on a particular area of emotionally charged personal experience — a person, say, or a series of events, or a period in my life. I have some small degree of control over this kind of formation in that I decide whether or not to accept it. I can postpone crystallization until I have finished a previous piece that is already begun and for which I have a structure fabricated, undercoated, and ready to accept its first being into itself. I try to hold the process of conception to a reasonable pace. There seems no end to this type of formulation. These concepts hover, already complete, it would seem, on the edge of my consciousness. In the early 1960s, when all this was new to me, I used to be overwhelmed and would wake up in the middle of the night flooded, inundated by peremptory demands for making these sculptures. We, they and I, have by now worked out a *modus vivendi*.

The force of my concentration can also be directed toward single visual events: a glimpse of radiant space, a plant in a lake, a juxtaposition of weights and shapes that matches, touches off, some powerful resonance in me. Certain sensory experiences elicit, draw forth into clarity, what visually they only infer. The laws they exemplify seem to spring from behind them, organizing a whole of form and color that lies just beyond what my senses apprehend.

Landfall, for example, came to me by itself, unexpectedly. I was driving to the studio at 1928 Calvert Street about 10:00 AM on a cool, rainy, windy day. I had opened the window beside me to feel the air, and rain hit my face in gusts. I put my head out into it and on the inside, behind my eyes, I was in a long, shallow, open wooden boat, multi-oared and with belling, rectangular, maroon sails, in wind-roughened waves. It was just after dawn; the sun, still tender, was behind me. Ahead, low on the western horizon, lay a coast just discernible as beach: landfall.

November 21, 1974

The *Arundel* series of paintings was begun in 1973; I continue to make them from time to time, and my feeling is that I will do so for some years to come. I use only

pencil and a very little white paint against a field of action I render at once active and inert by making it entirely white. In these paintings I set forth, to see for myself how they appear, what might be called the tips of my conceptual icebergs in that I put down so little of all that they refer to. I try in them to show forth the forces I feel to be a reality behind, and more interesting than, phenomena. I keep trying to catch the laws I can feel illustrated in phenomena: in meetings and just-not-meetings; in forces abutting, thrusting one against another, illuminating one another. A force is only visible in its effect, and it is the split second in which this effect becomes just barely visible that haunts me. The turns of life are secret.

These turns take place in time, and the more I think about time, the more sure I get that what my senses create is coded; that is, my experience enters my consciousness in accordance with a formula letting it into time. Ipso facto, willy-nilly, my sensory experience feels to me temporal. It has, too, a specific span and will end with my death. But that part of me that I guess I would have to call my soul not only has experience of a very different quality but also feels, clearly and unmistakably, outside of time.

January 13, 1975

The east-west-north-south coordinates, latitude and longitude, of my sculptures exactly reflect my concern with my position in space, my location. This concern, an obsession since earliest childhood, must have been the root of my 1961 decision — taken unconsciously in a wave of conviction so total as to have been unchallenged by logic — to place my sculptures on their own feet as I am on mine. This is a straight, clear line between my life and my work.

March 27, 1975

The change itself was set off by a weekend trip to New York with my friend, Mary Pinchot Meyer, in November 1961. [...] At the Guggenheim Museum, I saw my first Ad Reinhardt. I was baffled by what looked to be an all black painting and enchanted when Mary pointed out the delicate changes in hue. I remember feeling a wave of gratitude — to her for showing me such an incredibly beautiful fact and to the painter for having made it to be seen. Farther along the museum’s ramp, a painting constructed with wooden sticks and planes also caught my attention, setting off a kind of home feeling; I do not remember the artist’s name but I liked his using plain old wood such as I had seen all my life in carpentry. And when we rounded into the lowest semicircular gallery, I saw my first Barnett Newman, a universe of blue paint by which I was immediately ravished. My whole self lifted into it. “Enough” was my radiant feeling — for once in my life enough space, enough color. It seemed to me that I had never before been free. Even running in a field had not given me the same airy beatitude. I would not have believed it possible had I not seen it with my own eyes. Such openness wiped out with one swoop all my puny ideas. I staggered out into the street, intoxicated with freedom, lifted into a

realm I had not dreamed could be caught into existence. I was completely taken by surprise, the more so as I had only earlier that day been thinking how I felt like a plowed field, my children all born, my life laid out; I saw myself stretched like brown earth in furrows, open to the sky, well planted, my life as a human being complete. My yearning for a family, my husband and my children, had been satisfied. I had looked for no more in the human sense and had felt content.

I went home early to Mary’s mother’s apartment, where we were staying, thinking I would sleep and absorb in self-forgetfulness the fullness of the day. Instead, I stayed up almost the whole night, sitting wakeful in the middle of my bed like a frog on a lily pad. Even three baths spaced through the night failed to still my mind, and at some time during these long hours I decided, hugging myself with determined delight, to make exactly what *I* wanted to make. The tip of balance from the physical to the conceptual in art had set me to thinking about my life in a whole new way. What did I *know*, I asked myself. What did I *love*? What was it that meant the very most to me inside my very own self? The fields and trees and fences and boards and lattices of my childhood rushed across my inner eye as if borne by a great, strong wind. I saw them all, detail and panorama, and my feeling for them welled up to sweep me into the knowledge that I could make them. I knew that that was exactly what I was going to do and how I was going to do it.

January 1980

John [Gossage] told me that while he was photographing in Seattle his eye, wandering over the landscape, was caught, moved on (he was thinking, “That is a nothing photograph”), then moved abruptly back to settle on two telegraph lines intersecting at precisely the “right” point. He photographed them. The point of intersection and the lines themselves were, he said, those of the *Arundel* paintings. I mentioned what Eleanor Munro had said about the *Arundels*: that she had seen such interesting trajectories before — traces made by particles in a cloud chamber. I have never seen a cloud chamber, and I wonder if artists occasionally pick up a range of physical fact beyond ordinary sensory reach.

September 1980

I believe that I return so persistently to the insights of my childhood because what I think of as my nerve in art had its origin at that time in my first recognition that I was alien in the universe. And I believe that because this realization of alienness ground itself into my mind in that particular setting, its characteristics became highly charged for me. I turned to this setting, away from the void. It was a choice of life over death. So that certain band of experience — the landscape of my childhood in all its inflections — became entirely providentially the nearest to home I am ever likely to know on this earth. Within these inflections lies the range of my sensitivity.

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—MM

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